DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 388 EA 031 594

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| AUTHOR | Bottoms, Gene; O'Neill, Kathy |
| TITLE | Preparing a New Breed of School Principals: It's Time for Action. |
| INSTITUTION | Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, GA. |
| PUB DATE | 2001-04-00 |
| NOTE | 33p.; Supported by a grant from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | For full text: http://www.sreb.org. |
| PUB TYPE | Opinion Papers (120) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC02 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Academic Achievement; *Administrator Qualifications; Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Instructional Leadership; *Leadership Effectiveness; Parent Participation; *Performance Based Assessment; *Principals; Public Schools |

ABSTRACT

Accountability has changed nearly everything in education and has prompted the following questions: What do successful leaders need to know and be able to do? How do we prepare and develop effective school leaders? State legislation has established an urgency for improved student achievement in educational systems where too many students are not succeeding against the new standards. This era of higher standards and greater accountability requires a new breed of school leaders. This report is a review of what the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has learned about the practices of successful leaders and how these leaders are prepared. This new breed of principals will need to have comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement. Principals will need to know how to work with faculty and others to fashion and implement continuous student improvement. They will need to know how to provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum, and instructional practices. SREB maintains that professional leadership certificates should be awarded only to persons who have demonstrated the ability to improve curriculum, instruction, and student learning. Local districts need to think about how they will attract high performers. Universities need to create school leadership preparation programs that will make a difference in improving schools and student achievement. (DFR)

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# Preparing a New Breed of School Principals:

## *It's Time for Action*

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SREB

# Preparing a New Breed of School Principals:

## *It's Time for Action*

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April 2001

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Supported by a grant awarded to the Southern Regional Education Board from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds

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# Foreword

*"What do successful education leaders need to know and be able to do?"*

*"How do you prepare and develop effective school leaders?"*

These are important questions today because accountability has changed nearly everything. State legislation has established an urgency for improved student achievement in an educational system where too many students are not succeeding against the new standards. This era of higher standards and greater accountability requires a "new breed" of school leaders.

The Southern Regional Education Board has started a search for answers to these two essential questions. This report is a review of what we have learned about the practices of successful leaders and how these leaders are prepared. We believe this new breed of principals will need to:

- Have comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement;
- Know how to work with faculty and others to fashion and implement continuous student improvement; and
- Know how to provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum and instructional practices.

For more than 15 years, SREB and many other groups have studied and spoken to the educational leadership concerns identified in this report. We believe it is time for states to act. The first step is important: Award professional leadership certification only to persons who have demonstrated the ability to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning. It is time for local districts to think about how they will attract high-performers. It is time for universities to create school leadership preparation programs that will make a difference in improving schools and student achievement.

During the next few years, SREB proposes to pursue four actions to improve school leadership:

- Create a leadership preparation prototype outside of the traditional university-based program, demonstrate it and market it.
- Create a network of higher education institutions that have an interest in working together to reshape the traditional leadership preparation program by giving

greater emphasis to the knowledge and skills needed by school leaders to improve curriculum, instruction and student achievement.

- Work with one or more state leadership academies to design, pilot and refine a leadership academy program that prepares existing and emerging leaders to plan and carry out comprehensive middle grades and high school reform.
- Establish a regional goal for improving leadership around a single priority — raising student achievement in middle grades and high schools — and develop indicators for tracking progress in achieving the goal over the next decade.

We need to strengthen preparation and professional development programs for all school leaders — principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, superintendents, central office administrators and curriculum specialists. While this report focuses on the school principal as the critical player in school-building reform, many of its findings and recommendations apply equally to preparation programs for other school leaders.

Mark Musick
President

# Preparing a New Breed of School Principals:

## *It's Time for Action*

In the world of school leadership, high-stakes accountability has changed nearly everything.

There was a time when principals were expected to do little more than "hold" school. Superintendents and school boards were satisfied if every classroom had a teacher, if every student had a set of textbooks, and if every class moved from one grade to the next at an orderly pace.

If students dropped out of school or drifted into low-level classes, their failure was regrettable, but not surprising. Some students were "destined" to fail. So long as discipline and order prevailed — and the buses ran on time — a principal's job was secure.

*But no more.*

Across the United States, state legislatures are responding to rising expectations in the workplace and the demands of a global economy by setting higher standards for schools. To enforce these standards, legislatures are creating high-stakes assessment systems that hold schools accountable for student achievement.

In the not-too-distant past, responsibility for school success was something principals could "share around" with other educators, with parents, and with students themselves. The principal served as production manager. Quality control was somebody else's job.

*But now it's gotten personal.*

Increasingly, state accountability systems are placing the burden of school success — and individual student achievement — squarely on the principal's shoulders. The principal's job description has expanded to a point that today's school leader is expected to perform in the role of "chief learning officer," with ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the enterprise.

Today's principal must be prepared to focus time, attention and effort on changing what students are taught, how they are taught, and what they are learning. This formidable challenge demands a new breed of school leaders, with skills and knowledge far greater than those expected of "school managers" in the past.

Which leads us to our first essential question: *What do today's successful school leaders need to know and be able to do?*

### Defining the Challenge

High standards are important, but high standards cannot guarantee student success. The proof can be found in state assessment data. Across the United States, the standards movement is straining with unfulfilled expectations. Too many students are failing to meet benchmarks for promotion or graduation. Some states and large school districts find themselves "adjusting" their standards downward.

Many students are not succeeding against the new standards because — for the first time in history — we are demanding that middle schools and high schools do for ***all*** students what we only expected for one-fourth of our students in the past.

Schools are not less effective today. By any fair measure, their performance matches or exceeds the schools of 20 or 30 years ago. But their challenge is greater today — and far too many schools have not changed enough to meet the expectation that all students can master demanding subject matter and apply what they have learned to solve real-world problems.

The reality is that schools must change ***fundamentally.*** The challenge is to redesign middle schools and high schools so that virtually every student gains the skills and knowledge that have been traditionally taught to only the most talented and best situated. If schools succeed in this redesign, many more high school graduates will be able to pursue postsecondary studies without being placed first into remedial courses — and many more young adults will be prepared to enter and advance in knowledge-based jobs.

Before we can redesign schools, we must redesign the programs that prepare school leaders. We cannot have one without the other.

## Leadership for Change

In the next few years, we have an opportunity to identify and prepare a diverse group of school leaders who can change curriculum and instruction and build higher performing schools.

A looming shortage of school administrators presents us with both a crisis and an opportunity to redefine what it means to be a "school leader." A 1999 report by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds estimates that in the next six years 32,000 principals (40 percent of the country's school-building leadership) will be eligible to retire. In addition, nearly one-half of the country's 15,000 superintendents will reach retirement age.

In the hot-seat environment brought about by high-stakes accountability programs, school systems are having increasing difficulty recruiting new leaders to take the places of retiring administrators. The explanation most often given in media "sound bites" is that the principal's job has become impossible to perform. **But the real problem is that our recruitment, preparation and professional development programs for school leaders are out of sync with our scaled-up expectations.**

Personnel shortages in education never last long. We can be sure that school boards will find someone to fill every principal vacancy. The real "emergency" we face is the prospect that unless we recruit and train school leaders who have a deep knowledge about how to improve the core functions of a school, we will do little to resolve spotty leadership, low-achieving schools and under-served students.

And so we come to our second essential question: *How can we prepare and develop effective school leaders?*

## Searching for Answers

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is using several strategies to search for answers to this pair of essential questions — *What do today's successful school leaders need to know and be able to do?* and *How can we prepare and develop effective school leaders?*

- First, SREB commissioned a research literature review of school improvement strategies that work in improving student achievement in low-performing schools. Then we asked, "What implications do these findings have for future school leaders' knowledge, skills and preparation?"

- Second, we posed our pair of essential questions to a sampling of principals in the *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* network who had been successful in raising student achievement.
- Third, we convened a national "leadership planning council" to gather their views on these and related questions.
- Fourth, a focus group of 15 exemplary school leaders met to discuss what they did to improve student achievement, how they did it, and what experience prepared them to do it. The exemplary leaders were selected because they had been successful in turning around low-performing districts and schools with diverse student populations.
- Finally, we convened and posed these questions to groups representing higher education institutions and school districts, national leadership-oriented professional associations, professors of leadership preparation programs, directors of state leadership academies, state legislators, and business and industry representatives. Information gleaned from these conversations helped shape our ideas about what leaders in this new era of educational accountability need to know and be able to do and how best to select and prepare them to lead improvement in student achievement.

## *What do future school leaders need to know and be able to do?*

School leaders who are prepared to lead schools designed for higher student achievement need to:

- Have comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement;
- Know how to work with teachers and others to fashion and implement continuous student improvement; and
- Know how to provide the necessary support for staff to carry out sound school, curriculum and instructional practices.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Create a focused mission to improve student achievement and a vision of the elements of school, curriculum and instructional practices that make higher achievement possible.**

Successful leaders have a very targeted mission to improve student achievement. They have a vision of the school as a place that makes a difference in the lives of students, and they value every student in their present and future world. Middle school leaders believe their primary mission is to get students ready to succeed in challenging high school studies, and high school leaders see as their primary mission preparing students to make a successful transition to postsecondary studies and work.

School leaders need a deep and comprehensive understanding of changes in curriculum, instruction, school practices and organization that will produce gains in student achievement. Successful school leaders reject "one-shot" projects that do not fit seamlessly into a larger improvement initiative. School leaders should have sufficient knowledge about research-based school and classroom practices to develop or adapt, with the involvement of faculty, a set of guiding principles and goals that keep them focused on student learning. All school principals need to know how school leaders who have improved achievement in low-performing schools were able to get the faculty, students and parents to buy into the belief that being "smart" is based on effort and hard work and is not limited to students at the top of the ability chart.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Set high expectations for all students to learn higher-level content.**

Successful school leaders understand that increasing academic rigor and eliminating low-level courses have a positive impact on student achievement. They know how to use study groups to engage faculty, parents and others to give more students access to demanding courses with a minimum of social tension by proving it can be done. Leaders who have realized significant gains in student achievement made college-preparatory/honors classes the standard for all students. They are committed to providing schools where all students succeed and where all students have access to high-level content.

Educational leaders need to know how to help their teachers share the belief that all students can learn what their schools have previously taught only to their best students. Exemplary leaders use meetings, discussions, staff development activities, interviews with former students, visits to other schools and data to help faculty become dissatisfied with a system that does not educate all students well and to develop ideas about changes the school can make to raise the achievement of all students. As leaders, they help parents, teachers and even community members who are accustomed to the labeling and sorting of students to find value in giving more students access to demanding courses.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Recognize and encourage implementation of good instructional practices that motivate and increase student achievement.**

Future school leaders need deeper knowledge of content fields and instructional methods that motivate and engage students and connect subject matter content to real-world problems and projects. Well-prepared principals know how to select effective professional development for their schools, evaluate high-quality instruction, and understand and support teachers as they struggle to learn new ways of teaching.

School principals for the future must be well-versed in national, state and local standards and the curriculum and instructional methods that can help students meet standards. They must give leadership and support to teachers in aligning teacher assignments, student work and classroom assessment to higher content and performance standards. **As school leaders deepen their knowledge of research-based instructional methods and classroom assessment, they will become skillful at keeping a constant focus on quality classroom instruction.** They will be prepared to support a variety of successful practices, such as making observations, asking probing questions of students and teachers, and creating a setting for teachers to share their successes (and failures) with each other.

Future school leaders must use the computer and the Internet to enhance their own learning. Beyond that, they need to understand how technology can engage students in learning, what a classroom looks like when technology has been successfully integrated into instruction, and how to support teachers in learning how to use technology to advance student achievement.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Create a school organization where faculty and staff understand that every student counts and where every student has the support of a caring adult.**

School leaders need to know how to organize a school to achieve a personalized learning environment where every student counts and has a personal relationship with a caring adult. All students are more motivated to learn in such a setting.

Successful leaders work in schools of various sizes, but these leaders always establish some way to personalize learning. If the school is large, they are aware of the research on "small learning communities" and they reorganize to create schools-within-a-school. They have an adviser-advisee system so that every student has an adult mentor in the building who can help him or her learn about options, set

goals, choose courses and get extra assistance to meet course standards. The adviser-advisee process promotes intense parent involvement in supporting students to meet their present and post-high school goals. Successful leaders get parents to visit the school with their children at least once a year for an advisement session.

*Successful school leaders...*
**Use data to initiate and continue improvement in school and classroom practices and student achievement.**

The literature is clear on this matter. Collecting, understanding and using a wide variety of data are crucial leadership skills in these times of accountability. Successful school leaders must be adept at leading their faculty in action research and in using technology to analyze data. They know how to disaggregate data and connect assessment results to school and classroom effectiveness.

Future leaders need to understand how to use data as a discussion tool for reshaping the attitudes of teachers, parents and students about changing course offerings and instructional strategies. **Principals in schools that have made significant improvement in student achievement did not hide bad news but used data as a tool to get people to take ownership of the problems and to do something about them.** School leaders must have the persistence and courage to change a faculty mind set that everything in their school is fine. When change is mentioned in some schools, teachers exclaim, "This can't be done." Persistence in the use of meaningful data will eventually result in new behaviors and higher student achievement.

Principals need to understand how to present data to faculty and parents in a format that is understandable and clearly defines courses of action. This includes disaggregating data to show where the weaknesses are — by standards and by different groups of students. Successful leaders use data to make decisions about school and classroom practices and to provide curriculum interventions for students.

Successful leaders go beyond student achievement data to look at school practices, what students are taught, how they are taught and what is expected of them. They use data to prove to their faculty that low-achieving students have been exposed to inadequate schooling experiences and need a more rigorous curriculum and more engaging learning experiences to catch up. Research verifies that in schools where teachers analyze data and study research about teaching methods that have proven successful for students, more effective instructional strategies emerge in the classrooms.

Successful schools that are "data-driven" rely on many sources of information, including student feedback, instruments that measure student progress, and statistics that are collected formally and informally.

Successful leaders do not wait for data from the "big tests." They support teams of teachers to collect and analyze students' work against performance standards, to use common end-of-grading period exams and collectively study the results, to prepare common scoring guides and apply them to students' work, and to help guide instruction on a day-to-day basis. Future leaders need to understand that it is hard to know if you are making progress if you do not measure along the way.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Keep everyone informed and focused on student achievement.**

Exemplary school leaders are very visible in their schools. They spend the majority of their time in classrooms with the teachers and students. Their actions communicate a belief system that principals should stay in touch with the classroom and dedicate their time to curriculum, instruction and issues of teaching and learning. They must have a clear message that constantly communicates to everyone about the things that matter the most to student achievement:

- Providing demanding courses and engaging assignments;
- Getting smart by working hard;
- Helping students make sense out of what they are asked to do; and
- Giving students needed extra assistance to meet course standards.

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a schoolwide focus on student achievement. And the definition of "effective communication" is changing. In many schools, the traditional newsletters, presentations at civic club meetings, and mailings have been replaced with Web sites, electronic distribution lists, group e-mails and listserv discussions. The work of a leader at the highest level is to use personal contacts and technology to lead the conversation about what is essential and what is not.

Future leaders must understand the need to create opportunities for themselves and their faculty to communicate with teachers, leaders and parents from feeder schools about rising standards and expectations, and about what entering students need to know and be able to do. At the same time, they need to create opportunities for themselves and their faculty to get feedback about their strengths and deficiencies from schools that receive their students.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Make parents partners in their student's education and create a structure for parent and educator collaboration.**

There are documented positive relationships between high parental involvement and high student achievement. The school leaders who reported that they reached out and involved parents had schools with higher student achievement. Successful involvement includes a deep and intense effort on the part of the school to include parents in many aspects of the education of their children. This may mean sending staff to a student's home to explain how the school operates, asking parents to sign a learning contract, or establishing community and family traditions that encourage school involvement.

Successful leaders make parents partners and create a structure for parents and educators to work together. For example, in high school they build long-term plans for students that outline four years of high school and two years beyond. Successful leaders are committed to telling parents the truth about their children's progress. They explain that in order for students to succeed, there must be shared ownership of any problem. Parents know what the school will do, what they must do, and what the students must do to produce higher student achievement. Successful leaders understand that the school cannot do it alone, and they understand how to get teachers, parents and students to work with them. This support benefits the students and results in more students taking more challenging courses and achieving at a higher level.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Understand the change process and have the leadership and facilitation skills to manage it effectively.**

Future school leaders need to understand how to provide their staff with experiences and conditions that will create dissatisfaction with the current level of student achievement and with current school and classroom practices. Successful leaders encourage meaningful discussion and dialogue focused on the education of the student — even if it generates different ideas and conflicts. Study groups and discussion groups are part of the staff development program.

Effective principals understand that change occurs when other school leaders agree there is a problem and take ownership for it and for the solution. Part of the process of being an effective school leader is understanding how to organize, lead and facilitate experiences that result in consensus among the faculty, parents and

community leaders. **Leaders need opportunities to gain broad knowledge of "change" literature in education and other settings, to study case studies of effective school change, to observe and participate firsthand in such experiences, and to have their own leadership and facilitation skills critiqued.**

Further, future leaders need to know how to orchestrate an array of experiences that result in more staff changing their beliefs about how much some students can learn. Through these experiences, the staff gains insights into how to raise expectations and teach a demanding curriculum to more students. Successful leaders challenge people in a way that requires changes in their priorities, their values and their habits. It is never comfortable to be a lightening rod, but successful school leaders understand how to deal with the change process. They are persistent and decisive and they take action.

School leaders must learn how to separate "skeptical resisters" from "professional resisters." They need to know how to identify the "skeptical resisters" and involve them in thinking about the best ways to implement a major change. And they must learn how to prevent the "professional resisters" from becoming a barrier to major school improvement.

Successful leaders are not afraid to involve others in meaningful discussion and dialogue about change and to earn their "buy-in." Because they are true leaders, they have the ability to take people where they would not go alone. In the process, they build schools that support greater student learning.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Understand how adults learn and know how to advance meaningful change through quality sustained professional development that benefits students.**

Leaders need to understand how to tie professional development to a school improvement plan; make it ongoing; and provide professional development opportunities that will make a difference in student achievement. They make sure teachers are well-trained in new instructional methods and the effective use of "blocks" of instructional time. They create a strong support system for new teachers that orients them to the school's vision and provides long-term mentoring.

Future leaders must know how to get beyond the traditional passive model for staff development that relies primarily on one-shot afternoon speakers and travel to professional conferences. They need to gain skills in leading a community of learners and must serve as models of professional "life-long learners" themselves. **They must know how to support staff development through study groups, problem-**

**solving sessions and regular meetings to discuss students' needs.** To ensure continuous professional growth in the school, the successful principal must develop a network of teacher mentors and master teachers who can serve as on-site staff developers. Leaders who know how to give faculty the time and opportunity to adjust and learn new strategies and plan for follow-through will create a school where everyone is always improving.

Exemplary leaders are committed to making the most of every professional development opportunity. Rather than send one or two individuals to a conference, they take a team that might include the principal or other key leaders from the staff. They will organize a time at the conference for the team to meet and share what they have learned and to plan what they can share and implement at their school that will improve student achievement. This is a powerful model, because when the team returns to the school, it takes ownership of the ideas and supports their implementation.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Use and organize time in innovative ways to meet the goals and objectives of school improvement.**

Future leaders cannot be prisoners of time. They must know about and advocate a variety of scheduling models that promote extended school days, extended school years, tutorial programs, innovative summer school programs and other methods to increase time for student achievement. "Time" must be seen by everyone as an important commodity that makes it possible for faculty to discuss students' needs, improve instruction and align classroom assignments and students' work to higher standards.

Successful leaders know that teachers must spend more time planning classroom instruction if they are going to help all students achieve at higher levels. Teachers have to plan instruction that goes beyond the textbook if they are to add relevancy to lessons and convince more students that the learning they are being asked to master is important.

Successful leaders also know that some students need extra time and support to meet standards. They provide that time through a variety of methods like tutoring, extra sessions during breaks, and summer school. One leader rearranged summer school so that each student was assigned to a teacher for special tutoring. Teachers had no more than five students each and the freedom to schedule help for students as needed.

Effective principals do not water down the curriculum or slow the pace but use extra time and support to help students meet course standards. They believe that effort is a far greater indicator of success than ability and believe, given enough time and support, that most students can achieve at high levels. They use time to promote a continuous improvement model for their students and their schools.

The successful school leaders we interviewed were not willing to lose instructional time to interruptions, athletic events, pep rallies, teachers' meetings or extracurricular activities. Instructional time was guarded. One principal saw that excessive use of the intercom was eating up precious classroom instructional time. She also realized that the school's Friday prom schedule curtailed instructional time, because students checked out early or did not come to school on prom Friday. She eliminated the use of the intercom, changed the prom to Saturday, and refocused her school on the necessity of giving instructional time the highest priority.

*Successful school leaders...*
**Acquire and use resources wisely.**

Future leaders must be entrepreneurs, with the knowledge and skills to secure needed resources from a variety of sources. With the help of faculty, they need to know how to write grants or develop partnerships with businesses, universities and community agencies.

Exemplary leaders will not wait for someone else to provide what may be needed to improve their schools. They are constantly searching for dollars to support staff development, technology, time for teachers to plan, curriculum alignment, Saturday morning tutorials, make-up classes and summer transition programs. Some leaders we interviewed even made arrangements with a college to support the statistical analysis of their performance data. The list is almost endless. These leaders essentially search for resources that support anything that helps students achieve. Technology is especially important to these leaders, since it is not just a management tool for them but a teaching and learning tool for their teachers and students.

*Successful school leaders...*
**Obtain support from the central office and from community and parent leaders for their school improvement agenda.**

Future leaders need to understand how to develop key "champions" for their improvement agenda. They can do this by continuously sharing with parents and community leaders meaningful information about: the current state of student achievement and of school and classroom practices; what the school is doing to

improve; how parents and the community can help; and the progress being made. Learning how to use key central office staff and community and parent leaders as friendly critics and advisers in developing and carrying out an improvement agenda can provide leaders with key spokespersons in the larger community.

Exemplary leaders develop relationships with central office personnel who give them the necessary support for their improvement agenda. They nurture allies among community and parent leaders who provide critical support when things become confrontational. One principal who fostered a non-traditional schedule was confronted with a board that wanted to return to a traditional high school schedule. The principal never had to address the problem, because the community, already aware of the success the school was having with the new schedule, protested and the issue was dropped.

*Successful school leaders...*

**Continuously learn and seek out colleagues who keep them abreast of new research and proven practices.**

Learning, for exemplary leaders, is an ongoing endeavor and they model life-long learning to their teachers. They create ongoing professional conversations among their peers in their own school systems. They establish relationships with a variety of professional groups and with organizations like *High Schools That Work (HSTW)*, the Coalition of Essential Schools, New American High Schools and the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, to name a few. They find that these networks give them a comprehensive set of key practices that they and their teachers can use as a framework for school improvement. These networks provide access to resources and opportunities to learn from other schools.

## *How Can We Prepare and Develop Effective School Leaders?*

When we reviewed the research literature and talked with successful principals and other experts, SREB found considerable agreement about what present and future school leaders need to know and be able to do. We found much less agreement when we posed our second question: "How can we prepare and develop effective school leaders?" The remainder of this report explores this question and considers a number of changes that can strengthen the certification, selection and support of school leaders.

If most students are going to reach high standards, states and districts must have more leaders who can work with teachers and communities to turn low-performing schools into high-performing schools, and ordinary schools into schools of excellence. States and districts willing to redesign their leadership programs and make calculated investments can meet the demand for a new breed of school principals and other leaders.

### Local Districts Can Tap and Develop Potential Leaders

To have school leaders with a comprehensive understanding of instruction and school practices and who can work with others to solve problems, local districts must initiate a screening process to identify and tap future leaders who have demonstrated these qualities and have a passion for getting students to meet high-performance standards. Tapping high performers as future leaders is a model often used by business and the military. All of the successful leaders interviewed by SREB had been identified early in their careers because someone had recognized their potential as future school leaders. Once selected, quality experiences and support are essential to enable these potential leaders to grow and become effective school leaders.

## What States Can Do

Analyzing data from many sources suggests that states can have more effective school leaders by:

- Tapping potential leaders in local school districts with demonstrated knowledge of curriculum and instruction and then planning quality school leadership growth opportunities for them;
- Opening the educational leadership certification process to more educators with a proven record of success;
- Basing professional certification on performance;
- Making major changes in university-based school leadership preparation programs;
- Offering quality alternatives to traditional university school leadership preparation; and
- Requiring that to maintain leadership certification one must successfully participate in continuous learning activities that are closely aligned to school improvement.

School districts can identify potential school leaders among those teachers seeking National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification, among teachers and staff who have acquired advanced degrees, and among those who have distinguished themselves in various ways in their work. What is needed by districts and states is a formal process through which potential leaders are spotted and nominated — including self-nomination with supporting sponsors. States can assign a person the responsibility of actively seeking highly productive persons as future leaders and leading them through a screening process, and local districts can develop a process that uses current school and system leaders to nominate potential leaders.

Processes for identifying potential leaders are available through assessment and development centers operated by professional organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) or nonprofit groups like the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). South Carolina requires all potential leaders to complete an assessment in an NASSP center, and Georgia, South Carolina and several other states include CCL assessments in their leadership academy programs. **Even if these screening processes are used, nominated candidates should be high performers and have demonstrated strengths in curriculum and instruction if systems want leaders who can lead high-performing schools.**

If states and districts do not want to use an outside center to screen potential school leaders, they can establish their own selection program. Candidates seeking to become school leaders would go through an extensive interview process aimed at reviewing their past accomplishments, their grasp of effective school and classroom practices, and their understanding of how school leaders can make a difference in improving student achievement. Potential candidates would complete a portfolio that would document their accomplishments, their broad understanding of schools and curriculum and instruction, and their ability to work with colleagues to overcome barriers to higher student achievement. The portfolio would be reviewed by a panel and information would be verified for accuracy.

There are tests that states and districts can use in screening school leaders for initial leadership certification. An exam could be used to assess their general knowledge. Exams could also be developed and used to assess their knowledge about research-based school and classroom practices and how to work with others for real change.

State and local districts must provide potential leaders with opportunities to learn from the most successful leaders inside and outside the school system. Many school districts are recognizing the need to develop a formal training program for those tapped as future leaders. Baltimore, for example, has launched an internship

program to pair aspiring principals with veteran principals for six months of on-the-job training.

Aspiring principals who are tapped should be supported financially by their school system as they intern or are accepted in an assistant principal's role and pursue a planned university or state leadership preparation program. **This "just in time" learning model, which grows out of university-district partnerships, allows potential leaders to connect new knowledge with real experience in schools, helping ensure that their learning is both practical and rooted in the latest research about high-achieving schools.**

All of the exemplary leaders interviewed reported that at early stages in their careers they were given job assignments, coaching and mentoring support, internships and educational experiences aimed at growing them as potential leaders. Most of these leaders were supported by their districts and schools to get involved in a range of leadership learning experiences. These experiences often included business and industry leadership training programs. Exemplary leaders who were in leadership positions while attending the university were able to make better connections between their class work and schoolhouse applications. They experienced intense learning and had a support system through the university and a network of colleagues. They were given the time and opportunity to develop confidence in their newly acquired skills and received enough on-the-job support to succeed.

### Open the Certification Process to More Successful Educators

In most states, leadership certification is open only to those who have education experience and who have a degree in educational administration. Allowing proven educators to seek initial leadership certification before earning an advanced administrative degree would be an effective and efficient way to build a large cadre of school leaders.

**Although most states continue to require potential school leaders to complete university coursework before they assume leadership positions, there is little evidence that the university programs as now conducted make any difference in preparing principals who create high-performance schools (Brent 1998).** In fact, some of the successful leaders we interviewed were not products of a traditional leadership preparation program, and others credited their success to learning experiences outside of formal leadership preparation.

A dean from a major university said, "If you want to change educational leadership preparation in universities, you have to change the certification process."

## Two States With Alternative Certification

Texas and New Jersey are among several states that allow alternative leadership certification. Texas now has six different alternative leadership preparation programs in place. The Texas requirements for leadership certification focus on meeting standards, not completing coursework. Three Education Service Centers and three universities have initiated programs that allow for a variety of preparation models. Education Service Center Region XIII and Tarleton College have programs that emphasize leadership skills through a variety of experiences developed around real problems of administrative practice. Some program participants serve as principals and assistant principals in participating school districts while others remain in the classroom as they complete their work.

New Jersey allows an individual with a master's degree or the equivalent in a recognized field of leadership and management to obtain a provisional license. Participants then must pass a test and serve a year in the Principal Residency Program conducted under the direction of a state-approved mentor. This opportunity is open to those who have the support of the school system and have been hired to work in a leadership capacity. For more information, check these Web sites: www.tarleton.edu, www.esc13.tenet.edu and www.state.nj.us/njded/educators/license/index.html.

States could open leadership preparation and expand their leadership pool by considering a multi-step certification process. For example, states might consider granting initial leadership certification to persons who have at least a master's degree and successful experience in education — or to persons with related work outside of education who have cleared a screening process that verifies their understanding of teaching, learning and curriculum.

Several states now award initial or first-level leadership certificates to persons with advanced degrees and demonstrated successful experience inside and outside education. The process is relatively new, and very little information is available about quality and numbers. However, the idea is sound, provided the individuals who receive the initial certificates have proven leadership skills, a commitment to high achievement for all students, an advanced degree, and access to a high-quality preparation program that will move them up the ladder to the next level of leadership.

### Base Professional Certification on Performance

In SREB's proposal, initial educational leadership certification would allow an individual to be employed as a school leader and would provide three years to earn a second level of certification — the professional certificate. During the three years, leaders with the initial certification would be enrolled in either a university-based or an approved alternative leadership preparation program. The awarding of the second-level credential would be based on performance — a demonstrated ability to increase and sustain high levels of student achievement rather than on course-work and credit hours.

**Performance-based certification should require new leaders to establish a portfolio containing evidence of changes that produced higher student achievement.** A qualified panel would evaluate the portfolio and verify its authenticity through field visits, interviews and other evidence. Professional certification would not be permanent. The decision to continue the certification would be made at selected intervals and determined by the quality of the continuing portfolio development and student achievement.

Several national organizations advocate developing a set of standards that would define exemplary practices among experienced school leaders. They propose a model that draws on the experience of the NBPTS. They also imagine a leadership "career ladder" where veteran leaders could move into the ranks of master principals and would likely be tapped as exemplary mentors for new and aspiring principals. This would serve several needs. It would give veteran principals a way to grow (rather than retire at their first opportunity) and also create a way to "stockpile" exemplary leadership experience and support new and aspiring leaders.

### Make Major Changes in University Leadership Preparation Programs

School systems remain dependent on university programs to supply new school leaders. Any effort to prepare a new generation of exemplary school leaders must recognize the need for most university-based leadership preparation programs to change:

- **What is taught** – Focus more on developing persons who can give leadership to improving the core functions of the school — curriculum, instruction and student learning;
- **How it is taught** – Give greater attention to learning experiences that apply leadership and research-based knowledge to solving field-based problems;

- **How to work with K-12 in designing and delivering the program** – Package leadership programs around comprehensive school-improvement designs adopted by districts and schools and involve district and school staff in program delivery.

Every successful leader we interviewed expressed the opinion that there was not enough emphasis placed on curriculum, teaching and learning, and student achievement in university preparation programs. **Based on interviews with leaders and conversations with discussion groups, principals who develop skills and knowledge to become instructional leaders do so primarily because of their own values and desires.** Other research backs up this finding (Elmore 2000).

The literature on school improvement strategies that work and the comments from successful school leaders are closely aligned. There appears to be little match between the courses required in the current leadership preparation programs and what one needs to know and be able to do based on effective school research and on what successful leaders say they do (Kronley 2000).

For example, most universities still require very little study in curriculum and instruction. Courses rarely address the skills needed to lead successful schools — such as the use of data to improve instruction and the use of effective teaching and learning strategies — or to make decisions about aligning courses, classroom assignments and students' work to standards (Kronley 2000 and Sykes 2000). Effective professional development and clinical supervision typically get little attention in the "curriculum" course. Virtually no courses address the issues of change, team building and how to apply research knowledge to school improvement.

University programs for educational leaders overwhelmingly emphasize traditional school administration, with most attention focused on financial management, labor negotiations, school law and facilities planning (Sykes 2000). All of these can best be delivered on the job closer to the time they are needed. Many leaders reported that taking these courses several years before they actually had a position was a waste of time. By the time they needed the information, they had forgotten it or much of it was outdated. Leaving these topics to be handled by academies or a series of Web-based modules offered to practicing school leaders would provide time for the university to concentrate more on curriculum, teaching and learning, and student achievement.

School leadership programs need major revision in what is taught to produce leaders who can help schools reach significant levels of reform. The literature review, interviews and discussions suggest that school leaders are going to need much more instruction about:

- How to establish rigorous academic and technical standards, how to use instructional methods that motivate and engage students, and how to connect the more abstract aspect of the curriculum to authentic learning experiences with depth and breadth;
- How to create and operate a school where faculty expect most students to achieve high standards, including an understanding of how people learn to create and manage a system of support that enables most students to meet high standards;
- How to set priorities for change that can realistically be accomplished and how to work with teams to build consensus and then motivate others, hold them accountable, evaluate them fairly, and reward them appropriately;
- How to create a personal, caring school and shift a school from teachers working in isolation to a series of small learning communities that support students in meeting higher standards;
- How to apply research knowledge to improve school practice and how to use action-research strategies in making continuous school improvement; and
- How to use technology for management and instructional purposes.

Such a shift in the content will give existing university-based programs the right to claim that they are in the business of training a new and different generation of school leaders.

### Redesign University Programs to Provide More School-Based Learning

Universities must give greater attention to learning experiences that apply leadership and research-based knowledge to solving field-based problems, and they must redesign university leadership preparation to provide more school-based learning. There was one point upon which all exemplary school leaders agree: **The traditional leadership preparation program and alternative programs should give more time and attention to mentoring and internships in schools and allow aspiring and veteran leaders to develop and maintain leadership skills and confidence in their professional practice.**

The culture within higher education will have to change if more collaboration is to occur between higher education and K-12. Faculty involvement with K-12 may actually prevent their promotion or tenure as it takes time from research, writing and publishing. Publications such as *Learning Connections* by Gene Maeroff illustrate the strengths, weaknesses and potential collaborations between K-12 schools and colleges, but exemplary partnerships are not common. Most university faculties do not see school support as part of their core mission, but contract with schools when services are needed. This does not allow for long-term involvement, follow-up or the kind of interaction that leads to higher student achievement.

The goal is to have universities modify the leadership curriculum to allow participants to apply research-based information and leadership skills, over a continuing period of time, in ways that allow them to use this new knowledge to solve problems in real schools. **We envision each candidate for a leadership degree working with real teachers and exploring real learning issues, then reflecting upon what is being learned with a group of persons who are working on similar problems in their schools.**

## What Universities Can Do

Other specific changes university leaders must make in their leadership preparation include:

- Giving significantly more emphasis to preparing leaders who can improve the core function of the school curriculum — instruction and student learning.
- Planning leadership programs around comprehensive school-improvement designs adopted by districts and schools and involving district and school staff in the program delivery.
- Giving more time and attention to mentoring and internships that allow aspiring leaders to practice leadership skills with master educational leaders in well-planned quality experiences.
- Creating alternative group-preparation programs designed for persons with initial leadership certification who are already employed in a school leadership role.

These programs could be similar to MBA programs in which employers recommend candidates who attend in collegial groups and are supported with time and money while in school.

A major problem identified through interviews and discussions was the disconnect between university coursework and the activities that occur on a daily basis in schools. Most colleges and universities have not made the necessary investment to develop and field-test instructional modules that link the application of knowledge and theory to improving schools and to reward professors for spending time working in schools as part of the preparation of school leaders (Sykes 2000).

Professors who teach educational leadership classes should know what we expect school leaders to know — but often they don't. The university course structure encourages the hiring of content experts who know aspects of school leadership but have little knowledge of all the skills needed. One solution is to recruit faculty from among successful school leaders and from other departments and colleges within the university. They could work together to design and teach leadership preparation courses that are, at least in part, school-based. In this way, these college faculty members would also serve as credible mentors and coaches to their students in ways that allow theory, research and application to meet in real schools.

### Offer Quality Alternatives to Traditional University Leadership Preparation

In the absence of research evidence linking university leadership training with school success, professional leadership certification should not be based exclusively on completing a set of coursework at a university. Alternative systems that rely on the demonstrated ability of a school leader to affect changes that result in improved student achievement should be developed. Aspiring school leaders should have the choice to participate in a formal leadership program to obtain a professional certification or structure their own customized leadership program under the direction of an approved mentor.

Options might include:

- Taking courses they chose from the traditional leadership preparation programs;
- Participating in a school improvement network;
- Working in an improvement effort with consultants;
- Working with school leaders who already possess a special "mentor credential" based on demonstrated improvement practices; and
- Customizing and developing their own program, submitting plans, and providing consistent evidence of their three-year growth, leading to a performance-based professional certificate.

## Conditions for University Change

Some key conditions are necessary to change university preparation programs:

- ☐ Create an advisory board made up of faculty, exemplary principals, state department of education representatives and other school leaders with diverse backgrounds who represent a wide range of schools and school systems who meet regularly to plan leadership offerings.
- ☐ Adjust budgets to allocate additional time, resources and staffing to coordinate and develop this new curriculum for the preparation of educational leaders.
- ☐ Solicit charters and waivers from state agencies as needed to address certification and accreditation issues.
- ☐ Support faculty with time to conduct school-based research to determine if program changes produce leaders who are successful at leading schools to higher levels of student achievement.
- ☐ Staff the program with faculty, practicing educators and others with broad research-based knowledge about practices necessary for effective schools and classrooms and the skills to apply the knowledge and redesign university leadership preparation to provide emphasis on school-based learning.
- ☐ Realign the promotion and tenure reward system to include the acceptance of school-based work as part of (or as an alternative to existing) tenure and promotion requirements.
- ☐ Demonstrate a willingness to participate in an ongoing evaluation process to determine if program adjustments are preparing leaders who can demonstrate the ability to produce high-achieving schools.

The intent is to encourage higher education institutions and others in partnership with school districts to create alternative programs to support groups of persons who have earned initial school leader certification. Instructional materials and course design would link research-based knowledge to school-based problems in ways that allow groups of participants to learn from each other. Many of the exemplary leaders we interviewed credited interaction with other colleagues as a vehicle that really helped them to learn and grow as a leader and often they learned more from colleagues than from college faculty.

Providing a new path to preparation and certification through performance-based certification should make school leadership positions more attractive to more individuals. **University and state leadership academies will undoubtedly play key roles in helping school leaders prepare for and complete performance-based requirements, but they should no longer have sole ownership or responsibility for the preparation of new school leaders.**

### Refocus State Leadership Academies on Comprehensive Improvement

Having effective school leaders is dependent upon having leaders who continue to gain new ideas and insights for improving their schools. One strategy is to refocus state-supported leadership academies and link them to states' comprehensive school-improvement agendas. State academies can partner with recognized national comprehensive reform networks and allow school leaders and their staffs to participate in these networks as one way to maintain professional certification. These networks can be either education- or business-based. These affiliations not only encourage new ideas but also give leaders and their teachers a pool of similarly focused colleagues to call upon for advice. Many of the school leaders we interviewed referred to their network experiences both inside and outside of education as being the main catalyst for their success. Working in these networks with school-site teams appeared to be even more powerful.

## The Georgia Story

Georgia is planning an alternative leadership institute to parallel the traditional university program but to operate separately under the direction of a board composed of practicing educators and representatives from the university and business communities. The institute will prepare and develop school and system leaders who can focus the school on improving achievement for all students. A combination of practicing educators, university faculty and business leadership trainers will form the resident faculty of the institute. Aspiring principals will be able to earn degrees in educational leadership or the credit needed for credentialing purposes, and experienced leaders will earn renewal credit. The institute curriculum will be based upon what successful leaders need to know and be able to do and will provide meaningful, in-depth experiences that combine theory, practice and application. Longitudinal data will be collected to track the progress of leaders and the success of their schools.

## The Samford Story

"Successful schools are organized around student learning, and the instructional leadership ability of the principal is key to creating this sort of systemic change," says Ruth Ash, dean of the education school at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, and a former local Alabama superintendent. **"Schools, like businesses, need leaders who encourage change and support organizational learning."**

The Samford leadership program is divided into five modules, each of which has its own handbook and Web-based activities. Principals in the program tackle authentic practice problems that require them to work together in teams. Participants must also complete improvement projects in their schools and report on their findings at each training session. As a result, Ash explains, there are "real and significant" improvements made in the participating schools during the course of the year-long professional development experience.

Samford, which won the U.S. Department of Education's National Award for Effective Teacher Preparation in 2000, uses the same problem-based approach in its educational leadership graduate degree programs. The goal, says Dean Ash, is to help principals become "chief learning officers" in their schools — principals who create open, inviting environments that minimize fear and support growth and innovation. For more information, check their Web site: www.samford.edu.

States need to link professional leadership recertification to school improvement results. This means that state leadership academies could become instruments for school improvement, and participation in reform networks — by school leaders with teams of teachers and district representatives — would become the preferred way to maintain professional certification. Presently, leadership recertification is not always tied to improved job performance, state accountability issues or standards.

Leadership academies, institutes and centers, although somewhat more school-based than the universities, still tend to dwell on the process of running a school or school system instead of focusing on how to promote change and innovation that results in higher student achievement. Academies in many states are still offering traditional classes, organized around disconnected topics rather than coordinated events focusing on problems that leaders have chosen to solve (Kronley 2000 and Kelley 2000). Changing the curriculum to support continuous school improvement would allow leadership academies to become the means for connecting the schoolhouse, the district and the state around accountability goals and standards.

## What Academies Can Do

State leadership academies must make essential changes:

- ☐ Work with an established network to develop, pilot and refine a set of instructional leadership modules that engage current and emerging leaders in applying research-based knowledge and processes to real problems that are creating barriers to comprehensive improvement in their schools.
- ☐ Support school districts in screening potential leaders with demonstrated leadership ability and knowledge of curriculum and instruction.
- ☐ Use instructors as resident coaches who have knowledge about what it takes to transform low-performing schools and who can help schools apply research-based knowledge to improve school and classroom practices.
- ☐ Offer academy-based programs focused on leadership for comprehensive improvement as an alternative to traditional university leadership preparation.
- ☐ Support staff in conducting school-based research to determine if the academy program is producing leaders who are improving student achievement.
- ☐ Work with networks of school-site leadership development teams in ways that allow them to learn from one another.
- ☐ Create an advisory board that meets frequently and includes state educational leaders involved in comprehensive school improvement, business leaders, and successful school and system leaders who have made significant gains in student achievement.
- ☐ Enroll teams from participating school sites composed of current school leaders, future leaders, teacher leaders and at least one district office representative.

**State leadership academies need to consider a team approach to professional development that involves the principal, teachers and sometimes persons representing the district and school board.** Leadership academies and other leadership preparation programs need to consider how they can encourage teams of educators to attend sessions. Many leaders report that they are seldom rewarded or supported for doing the "right things" to improve student achievement. The district and the board should create the "essential conditions" needed for leaders to be successful in achieving state, district and school goals. It is also important to develop teachers and other staff and to encourage them to take leadership roles in their schools. The principal cannot accomplish meaningful change alone.

## *Time to act*

For more than 15 years, SREB and many other groups have studied and spoken to the educational leadership concerns identified in this paper. In 1996, working under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and in collaboration with the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA), 26 states and nine associations crafted the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to define standards for school leaders. A majority of states have adopted these standards in the last five years, but even with these extraordinary efforts, little has changed. It is time for states to act.

**The most important first step: Award professional leadership certification only to those persons who have demonstrated the ability to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning.** It is also time for local districts to think about how they will attract high-performers to the principalship. It is time for universities to create a school leadership preparation program that will make a difference in improving schools and student achievement.

**SREB plans to pursue four actions to improve school leadership:**

**First,** SREB will create a leadership preparation prototype, demonstrate it and market it. The prototype will be built with one higher education institution and will serve aspiring, new and experienced leaders of low-performing rural and urban school districts and schools that have adopted SREB's school improvement framework. Middle grades and high school improvement designs — shaped by the challenges these schools face as they work to raise student achievement — will be the basis for creating a customized leadership preparation program. Participants will solve problems in their schools as part of a team that includes central office leaders and teachers. Information will be collected and analyzed to determine whether the leadership-preparation program design is resulting in principals who are able to lead changes in curriculum, instruction and student achievement — and if school leaders are being supported by system leaders in making these changes.

**Second,** SREB will create a network of higher education institutions that have an interest in working together to reshape the traditional leadership preparation program by giving greater emphasis to the knowledge and skills needed by school leaders to improve curriculum, instruction and student achievement. SREB will involve universities that agree to design leadership preparation programs around a comprehensive school-improvement framework and make major changes in their programs.

**Third,** SREB will work with one or more state leadership academies to design, pilot and refine a leadership academy program that prepares existing and emerging leaders with the skills they need to plan and carry out comprehensive middle grades and high school reform.

**Fourth,** SREB will establish a regional goal for improving leadership around a single priority — raising student achievement in middle grades and high schools — and will develop indicators for tracking progress in achieving the goal over the next decade.

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